

## **AIDS: Can Magic Lead Where Two Presidents Wouldn't?**

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By Henry A. Waxman

The AIDS epidemic is getting worse and no one has been able to make America focus on it. What we're missing is leadership from the top. In eight years in office, President Reagan mentioned AIDS only two or three times. In his hands-off style, he left policy to his staff and only responded directly when Elizabeth Taylor asked him to.

In three years in office, President Bush has been no better. He says nice things about people who are sick, but his policies are still driven by preaching, not teaching. Bush has had his picture taken with people with AIDS, but his budgets are business as usual.

And while the presidents have remained passive, ideologues from the right have trotted out one ridiculous idea after another to polarize the debate. First quarantine proposals, then mandatory testing. There have been attempts to separate the "good" people from the "bad" people with AIDS. There are proposals to lock up health-care workers and to gather the names of everyone with HIV. We've had 10 years of congressional hearings, but at every opportunity, both Reagan and Bush have opposed constructive legislation.

Even preventive research is held back; just this summer, the Administration canceled an NIH-approved study of sexual behavior that might have produced information about when and how to reach young people before they become infected.

When asked in Rome about Magic Johnson, Bush acknowledged that he hasn't done enough and said he wanted to "go the extra mile." But his idea of the extra mile has been no more than empathy.

Maybe Magic Johnson can lead in a way that two presidents haven't. He can tell young people, "It happened to me and it can happen to you." He can tell AIDS bigots, "This is an equal-opportunity disease." And he can tell people living with HIV, "We're going to keep going."

Some very well-known people have died quietly from AIDS, afraid of public reaction to their disease. But Johnson has courageously chosen candor. He, uniquely, might be able to sustain attention, to teach and to lead.